

Operation Iraqi Freedom: Thoughts from a deployed Dietitian

MAJ Colleen S. Kesselring, Dietitian, 21st CSH, Balad, Iraq

As I approach my 8 – month anniversary in Iraq, my thoughts turn to those at home who may be called upon to replace me now or years in the future.

The thought of deploying can be frightening. Out of many UNknowns, there is ONE known - leaving the comforts of home and your support system. You will find that nearly everyone feels the same way as you, but the stoic ones will not speak of it. Anxiety levels rise prior to deploying. This healthy response allows you to effectively channel your energy for preparing to leave. Most people don't want to leave the comforts of home, but the overwhelming majority face the music. What is great about the Army is that we are all in the same boat. In a short time you will establish a routine and a support system with your new brothers and sisters. What was previously anxiety producing, becomes the norm and becomes comfortable.

While most of us would rather be with our families in the comforts of home, there is one thing out here that can not be found in the states and is a tremendous source of pride, one that stays with us forever....treating combat soldiers, casualties and/or supporting those who do. Our fellow soldiers were called to place their lives in far more danger than a combat support hospital may face, but we patiently wait for them to come. We eagerly provide care and comfort to the injured soldier who is so grateful for our service. I will never forget the brave and battered faces when they look up from the cot into my eyes and quietly whisper, "Thanks." It's an experience that can not be found in garrison. Nothing can replace the bond of shared suffering grown out of an austere environment and nothing can describe its rewards. This feeling is my own medal, my own reward that I will carry with me forever.

Deploying is about personal courage - facing your fears and anxieties and stepping up to the challenge. Many people will reexamine why they want to stay in this organization when they may be called to serve in far away places with imminent danger. This reflection is a healthy response. In the words of my father, "If you never consider leaving, you may never understand why you stay." All of us need to come to terms with why we are in the Army. There is nothing wrong with serving your country and moving on to something else. But as you reflect on your motivations and your commitment to serve, remember the words of a Chaplain, "Courage is Fear after you've said your prayers."

My life was very comfortable prior to September 11th. I had finally arrived at FT Hood after 18 months of geographical separation from my new husband and was enjoying life. However, I always kept the words of Retired COL Margaret Applewhite in the back of my head, "It's not a matter of IF you'll deploy, it's a matter of WHEN." FT Hood is the

Mecca of deploying units. When September 11th hit, my anxiety did, too. Sure enough, I was designated PROFIS and within almost 4 months of September 11th, found myself in Kuwait, supporting those who hunted and captured the Taliban. After a 5-month deployment, I was still readjusting to life back in the States when the talk of war began again. In contrast to the first deployment, I was filled with doubts and anger. But I left silently, again serving when called to do so. All of those doubts and anger were erased when we traveled through Iraq, listening to the children and people cheering us. Iraqis, once forbidden to speak their minds, now openly engage in conversation discussing the benefits and fears of our presence here. Doctors who were once forced to cut off the ears of Iraqis without anesthesia can now provide care and comfort to the sick. I am one of over 100,000 soldiers who are helping to make history by lifting a nation out of unimaginable horror, and helping to repair their infrastructure as well as their hope. No matter the volume and strength of criticism about forces in Iraq, be mindful, we live in a society where the ability to criticize is a guaranteed freedom!

Yesterday, I ate my lunch with soldiers who had come in out of the danger for a few days. These 2 young soldiers were scouts who conduct reconnaissance missions for their company who will patrol, raid, and above all keep us safe. Every time I meet one of these young soldiers, my heart swells with gratitude as I say, "God bless you for what you do." As they looked at me their surprised eyes revealed pride. These fleeting moments make up a collage of experiences that turns hardship into reward and acknowledges the vast teamwork, which grows from complete strangers.

We all came into the army for different reasons. Some wanted the education; some wanted to escape their lives; a smaller number joined for sheer patriotism. No matter the reason, there is one thing that bonds us, Army values. The Army's framework of leadership is Be, Know, Do. What is the 'Be'? Army values: Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honesty, integrity, and personal courage. If you don't accept or live those Army values, you will never be an effective leader in this Army. For the 'Be' is the foundation of all levels of Army leadership. The hallmark value called upon when deploying is selfless service – putting the welfare of the Army before your own. You don't get to choose where or when you'll deploy or for how long. Struggling marriages, degree programs, children and understaffed organizations are not reasons for avoiding deploying. In the words of my commander, COL Liening, "Selfless service is NOT about, 'What's in it for me?'" but rather what does the Army and the organization need FROM me?

Even as I approach 400 days deployed in a two year period, I will stay until the end of my rotation and redeploy with my unit. I would not choose anything else. Despite the ups and downs, the successes and failures of life out here, the bond is strong and unbreakable, no matter the daily challenges that greet us. I will neither leave the warfighter, nor my team until ordered to do so.

So my message to you is this: examine why you chose to enter the Army, be honest with yourself, make a decision, execute, and don't look back. But above all serve with pride and dignity while you are with us. Sometimes the most difficult things in life are the

most rewarding. Don't underestimate yourself; you never know what you can do until you do it.



*MAJ Colleen Kesselring,
Dietitian with the 21st CSH*